Operation IRAQI FREEDOM—Marine Corps Logistics at Its Best?

by Col Robert E. Love

'The only thing harder than getting a new idea into the military mind is to get an old one out.'

—B.H. Liddell Hart

In the next few months and years there will be many studies, evaluations, analyses, and discussions around the smoking lamp addressing lessons learned from Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF). Data will be collected, dissected, and manipulated. Countless articles will be written using stochastic evaluation techniques. What follows is a rather unscientific assessment—one that I'm certain will be a part of the bow wave of articles on OIF.

There should be no doubt that the success of OIF was contingent on many factors. The first and foremost factor was—as in days of old—the tenacity of our individual Marines and sailors regardless of military occupational specialty. Their fighting spirit won the day. Second, OIF reinforced the need for and success of joint operations. Third, logistics continues to be, arguably, the linchpin necessary to sustain combat operations. To say that logistics went off "without a hitch" would be a gross distortion of the truth. To say that we could not have made it to Baghdad without the uncommon determination of our logisticians across the Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) would do a disservice to our fellow warfighters. It should be noted, however, that our Marines were successful in spite of marginally effective logistics information technology (IT), techniques, procedures, and organizations that were best suited for the 20th century.

For years our Corps has discussed, studied, vetted, argued, and reflected on how to best support the individual major subordinate command (MSC)/element and associated battalion, squadron, regiment, group of a MAGTF, base, or station. The solution set consistently differed based on the individual's perspective, experience, and billet assignment. Without consistency and a clear "road ahead," the default solution has been to distribute logistics capabilities to everyone, and as a result many are equally dissatisfied. As we seek a single solution to all of our challenges, we have been successful in creating derision in the ranks and fragmentation of our logistics capabilities thereby reinforcing low expectations and reducing the logistics community (in all elements of the MAGTF) to small, independent hamlets of tribal chieftains who lack unity of command or effort.

We deployed a large force across an ocean (task organizing en route to the area of operations); offloaded 11 maritime prepositioning ships (in 3 days less than doctrinally possible) in a country that had an extremely limited infrastructure (one major aerial/seaport of debarkation); moved gear to inland assembly areas; brought our logistics support organizations into the area of operations (while supported units were training and aggressively exercising equipment); established new organizations (i.e., Marine Logistics Command (MLC)); task organized others (1st Force Service Support Group (1st FSSG) task organized into combat service support groups, battalions, and companies); supported a rapidly moving, logistics intensive Marine expeditionary force (MEF) (reinforced) over 500 miles inland; and destroyed the organized enemy forces. And we did it by shear force and in spite of ourselves. Our garrison logistics IT was of marginal utility (in many cases the IT simply was not used while in other cases commercial systems were used "on the fly" in order to obtain in-transit visibility), we exercised limited supply and maintenance discipline (the Corps will be tracking down and fixing gear for years), and we created traditional hierarchical combat service support subordinate commands. Initial performance indicators, during the conduct of this short battle in the war on terrorism (approximately 3 weeks of actual fighting), are interesting to say the least. Mountains of supplies were moved from the continental United States into Iraq (over 9.8 million meals, ready-to-eat; over 8,000 short tons of ammunition (Class V (W)); over 55,000 repair parts), and yet, the supported unit did not receive the "right stuff, at the right time, at the right place" consistently.

OIF should be the "wake up" call to dramatically change the way we provide support. However, because we were so outwardly successful (we won didn't we?), OIF will be used as a venue for those who resist change to adhere to the old way of doing business. (Look how good we are . . . why should we change?) Consider the following:

Our logistics IT looks, feels, and operates as it did in the 1970s—slow, labor intensive, garrison oriented, unresponsive, and unused. (The supported unit simply stopped using the IT, scrounged parts, submitted manual rapid requests, and pushed forward—leaving the "bean counters" to sort it out when the bullets stopped flying.) No less than two supply systems were used by the two major Marine Corps logistics organizations in theater (1st FSSG and MLC). IT can be a force mul-

tiplier if procured, fielded, and used properly. The Marines of World War II did not have the benefits of 21st century technologies (the technology hadn't been invented yet) and developed procedures accordingly. However, it is a travesty that today's Marines and sailors, responsible for the MAGTF's logistics, continue to use the same or similar procedures and techniques and don't have access to the latest suite of software and communications equipment (satellite telephones and urgently fielded blue force trackers were a rare commodity) available to the rest of American society. Considering the amount of time and money spent in the last 10 years on IT Marine Corps-wide, we should have had a world-class logistics system for OIF. The 21st century battlefield is high tempo and information intensive. How can we expect world-class support if we arm Marines and sailors with numerous, outdated, stovepiped, garrison-focused processes and systems that are not interoperable? While we blindly adhere to the archaic weapons system acquisition process of the 1960s our Marines go without state-of-the-art IT.

Our logistics "hubs" look no different than they did in the last 30 to 50 years–large stockpiles of supplies that take up residence in rear areas. Materiel and supplies provide the illusion (overall fill rate was less than 55 percent) to the supported units that what they need will be there when they need it while tying up precious lift and financial resources–lift that could have been used for additional firepower, critical sustainment, or for tactical distribution within the area of operations, and the funds that could have been used to procure unit deficiencies. Compounding the problem was a priority system that, once abuse began, created a chain reaction that saturated the system with high-priority demands for everything from fly swatters to critical tank repair parts, regardless of true mission criticality.

Our combat logistics organizations were the same bureaucratic organizations (to include those embedded in each MSC) as they were in the 1970s and 1980s. Approximately half of all I MEF forces were committed to logistics operations, and we still could not provide timely and effective support across the full spectrum of logistics to the combat forces. (Average order ship time was approximately 23 days.) (See Figure 1.) No amount of reorganization will fix a broken process. We must streamline processes in order to improve logistics responsiveness. How many times must we relearn this lesson?

Combat forces were reduced to foraging for supplies (repair parts in particular) to sustain momentum. One of our logistics organizations grew to twice its "normal" size and still could not fulfill supported unit critical supply requirements, despite the availability of resources. Horror stories abound of *available* critical repair parts being somewhere between the Kuwaiti aerial/seaport of debarkation and the frustrated supported unit in Iraq–as the supplies remained locked in the logistics chain. (At the conclusion of hostilities over seventy 20-foot containers, containing requisitioned repair parts, were returned from Iraq to Kuwait unused and undelivered.) "Seams" between logistics organizations created logjams in the logistics stream. The doctrinal processes used were sequential, cumbersome, and slow. They employed information and distribution systems (including ground, air, and sealift) that were not tactically responsive. Once again, we have "learned" that increasing the size of an organization or reorganizing existing organizations, while using old processes, will not improve effectiveness to the warfighter.

The Commandant of the Marine Corps took a bold and audacious step by directing the use of new and innovative processes to support the combat forces. Many of these processes were recently introduced into a finite number of organizations within the Operating Forces and were successful. Still others require refinement, but all contributed to offset–to a limited extent–the inadequacies of outdated IT, logistics organizations, and procedures. One of these logistics organizations streamlined its processes, having the unintended consequence of creating a large buildup of supplies and bottlenecks at intermediate logistics support areas that could not be distributed by other units using doctrinal (sequential and cumbersome) procedures.

There are at least four fundamental elements to providing responsive logistics. First, the Marine Corps must invest in *state-of-the-art IT* and field it quickly. Second, it must employ efficient *processes* in order to provide effective combat support. (Contrary to popular belief, the attributes of efficiency and effectiveness are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are mutually dependent.) Third, it must *train* to support the needs of supported units. There must be a

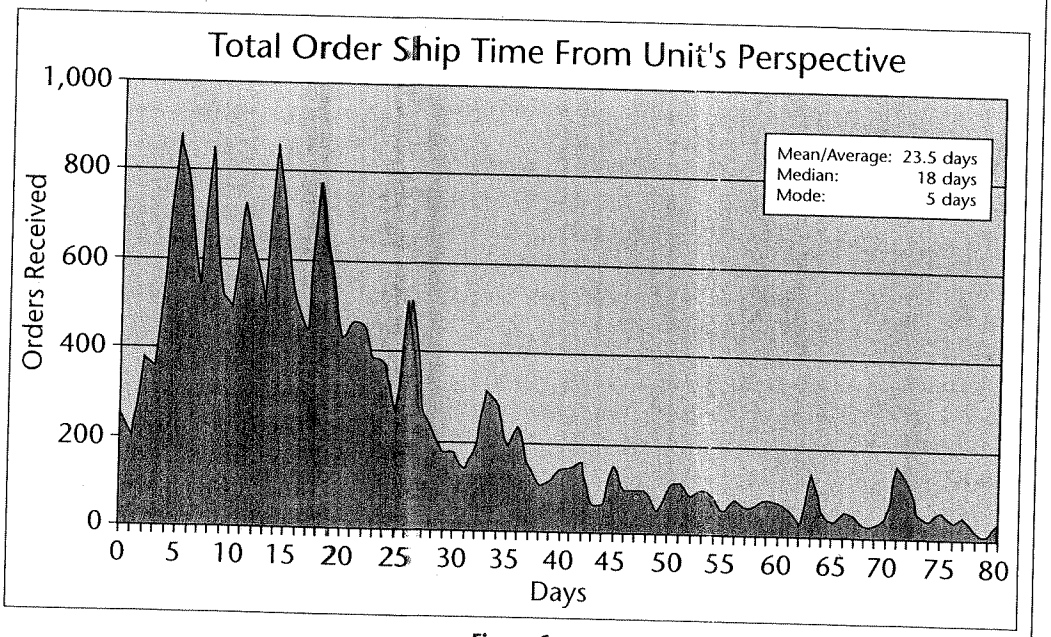

Figure 1.

requirement to train as a "customer-facing" organization, giving the supported unit the opportunity to develop habitual relationships. Fourth, it must organize in a manner that will provide the most *flexibility* to support a wide range of employment options, the ability to concentrate logistics where and when required, effectively exploit scarce resources (people, equipment, supplies, etc.) and, finally, support the needs of the MAGTF commander. (The insatiable desire by individual units to control resources should not outweigh the MAGTF commander's requirement to fulfill mission needs.) We must avoid the natural tendency to remedy logistics responsiveness by "simply" reorganizing, modifying old systems (we've implemented hundreds of modifications for SASSY (supported activities supply system), MIMMS (Marine Corps integrated materiel management system), and ATLASS II+ (asset tracking and logistics automated support system) and still can't get the product to the supported unit on time), and by working longer hours.

If we are going to cure logistics we must seek out the root cause of the disease and treat it, no matter how distasteful or uncomfortable the remedy. We have the best Marines and sailors in the world, and they won't accept failure. They will work 24/7 to offset the "systems" inadequacies in order to provide the best support possible, given the limitations discussed in this article. We must have the integrity to face up to our shortcomings, the selflessness to do the right thing (regardless of majority opinion), and the courage to take bold action. Our Marines and sailors deserve better.

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>*Note: All data was compiled from 1st FSSG and MLC sources.*

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